VENERABLE OR VULNERABLE
Acts 4:1-12
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Elie Wiesel is a European Jew who lived through the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp. Ever since he has committed his considerable literary talents to the task of keeping the memory alive. He writes about the Holocaust - regularly and well.

In one of his intriguing stories, The Town Beyond the Wall, a survivor of a concentration camp is obsessed with the desire to visit the Hungarian village from which he had been deported as a boy of fourteen. One particular memory has haunted him over the years. As he stood at the Railroad Station in the early morning, along with all the other Jews, to be herded onto boxcars, he turned to take one last look at the town. His eyes came to rest on the building across the street. In the second story window he saw a face, a passive expressionless face watching the tragedy below. That is the memory that haunts him - that face. And when he returns years later - after the war - he walks to the Station, turns and looks up - and the face is still there.

It's just a story, of course. But Wiesel writes: "How could one remain indifferent? The executioner I understood. The victims I understood, but with more difficulty. But those others, all those others, who were neither for nor against; who sprawled in passive patience; those who said the storm would blow over and all would be normal again; those who thought themselves above the battle; those who were permanently merely spectators; those were all closed to me. How can one remain a spectator indefinitely? How can one continue to embrace the woman he loves, to pray to God with fervor if not faith, to dream of a better tomorrow after seeing all this?" (Robert Doom, "Consider the Holocaust", Presbyterian Outlook, 4/23/79, p.14). The question of how it was possible continues to haunt us. How possibly could one of the most civilized cultures in the world produce such a demonically evil phenomenon as Nazism?

How could people who produced Bach and Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller and Martin Luther - also produce a Hitler, Goering, Himmler, Goebels? How could a whole nation turn its eyes as its entire Jewish population was exterminated?

Some of the best scholars of our generation have asked and are asking that question. Hannah Arendt, for instance, brilliantly in her classic study, Eichmann: The Banality of Evil, suggests frighteningly that there is no single, horrible ethical flaw in the German character. She portrays Eichmann as an uncomplicated, terribly ordinary middle-class professional man who simply did a good job at whatever he was told to do. Arendt suggests that mass evil is always a possibility when people are willing to suspend individual ethics in order to obey the commands of the authorities.

Herman Wouk, in his current best seller, War and Remembrance, comes to the same conclusion, in agonizing detail. The people who did it were not monsters: they loved their families and grew flowers and liked classical music and went to church. They were motivated mainly, by ordinary self-interest.

Wiesel asks how it is possible to love, pray and hope after seeing what he has seen. Rabbi Richard Rubenstein in an angry book, After Auschwitz, holds that it is no longer too plausible even to think about God after the Holocaust.

For me, at least, a more difficult question is how to believe in the church? How could the church - Christian people individually, and the corporate institution simply have turned its head the other way? The haunting question remains: would we have behaved differently? Could it happen here?

Dr. Franklin Littell, Church Historian at the University of Chicago, writes, "The meaning of the Holocaust for Christians must be built into the confessions of faith and remembered in the hymns and prayers. That was the turn in the road that most of the churches missed, and many of them are still plodding down a dead-end trail that leads away from the Kingdom of God." (Ibid).

The German Church was a venerable institution - much too venerable to become vulnerable. Much of the church was simply too involved in the culture to be critical. The culture succumbed to demonic anti-Semitism, and much of the church played it safe, excusing its cowardice with very respectable statements like "religion and politics don't mix". The exceptions - the heroic instances when the church did not crumble, when it stood tall and brave and vulnerable - preserved German Christianity. For as long as Christian saints are remembered Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Underground Confessing Church of Germany will be among them.

Venerable or vulnerable? Two words that look very similar. Venerable means "worthy of honor and respect by reason of prolonged testing". We like that word and that idea. We Presbyterians, particularly, like to think of our church and its traditions as venerable. Vulnerable, on the other hand, means something altogether different. Vulnerable means capable of being wounded, exposed, open to attack or damage. The word and idea are not nearly so attractive. Vulnerability is something we try to avoid. Venerability is something we try to achieve over the years.

The disciples of Jesus, in this respect, were no different. Given a choice they would have elected to be venerable hands down over vulnerable. Their natural inclination, as it is with all of us, was to seek safety and security, to go for the sure thing rather than the long shot, to avoid taking unnecessary chances. But more and more, since those momentous events of the Passover weekend, the friends of Jesus felt themselves becoming vulnerable. It seemed that the more committed to the Gospel they were, the more open to attack, the more exposed to danger they became.

In our text this morning the disciples of Jesus are still in Jerusalem after Easter, but they are not hiding behind locked doors any longer. Ever since the day of Pentecost they have been moving about freely, telling the story of what had happened to them to anyone who would listen. Several weeks before they had acted like frightened men: now they were behaving fearlessly, almost foolishly. They were becoming very vulnerable.

In the text this morning Peter and John have healed a man outside one of the Jerusalem Temple gates,and attracted a crowd. Peter seized the occasion to tell the story of Jesus. The crowd got larger. They remembered Jesus. It was just a few weeks ago that He had come into the Temple Himself and upset the tables of the money changers. They remembered how the authorities were upset, how they hounded Him and finally persuaded the Romans to execute Him on the day before the Sabbath. And here they were again, two of His friends, telling the story and claiming now that their Jesus was the Messiah, the one promised from antiquity. These fellows were asking for trouble, deliberately making themselves vulnerable.

In the middle of Peter's sermon,the police arrive and haul Peter and John off to jail. The police, in this instance, are the Sadducees, Temple priests and Temple guards.

The next morning the Sanhedrin gathers for a kind of hearing, during which Peter and John are warned to stop telling the story, and at the conclusion of which they refuse - in Peter's words "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (4:20). The irony here, as is the case with so many Biblical texts, is that vulnerability wins and venerability loses. From the perspective of history we know that the lowly will be exalted, the losers will be winners, but no one knew that at the moment. The Sadducees had the real political power in the first century Judea. The New Testament is more interested in the Pharisees because of their commitment to the law. But the Sadducees were the aristocracy, the House of Lords, the landed gentry. They were, that is to say, venerable. They had Peter and John arrested because they were disturbing the peace, and the next thing you know the Roman soldiers would be back to establish order - and nobody wanted that. They had made a career of avoiding vulnerability. They represented established religion, government and justice, decency, law and order and they knew how to protect their flanks.

The two disciples, in this scenario, on the other hand, are almost pathetically vulnerable. They have absolutely nothing to lose. They have no property to protect, no political power, no prestige, reputation, position in the community. They aren't venerable at all. What they are is free - which means vulnerable. They are also, the Christian faith maintains, fully human. They are, in their freedom and vulnerability, living life as God intends it to be lived.

Christians ought to become wary of their own venerability. Christians ought to become uncomfortable when their churches are venerable. Venerability greatly reduces your options: venerability means protecting your flanks and not taking chances. It's hard to be venerable and follow Jesus.

Church history is uncomfortably instructive here. The greatest days of the church were, without exception, vulnerable, dangerous days. The church has never been more vital, more energetic and creative than when it has been persecuted. The more the Romans tried to stamp out Christianity, the more rapidly it spread. Protestantism thrived in the Reformation era because it was illegal. Our Scottish forbearers built their strong church on the blood of their martyrs. The Covenanters were regarded as outlaws because of their insistence on the Presbyterian way, and their aversion toward the established church of England. Their custom was to gather out-of-doors for worship, high in the hills, at some remote spot, with the constant danger that English troops would discover them. When that happened a massacre ensued. The Borders Region of Scotland is dotted with monuments to the Covenanter martyrs; vulnerable but invincible. I was moved last week, on the Campus of Oberlin College, to see a beautiful memorial to a group of American missionaries murdered in China in the Boxer Rebellion, moved by the selflessness of their loyalty - but also the vigor of the church that produced them. And today, throughout the world, Christianity is most vital, most energetic in precisly those places where it is vulnerable, exposed to attack: Russia, S. Africa, Korea, Brazil.

The reverse is also true, history teaches us. The more venerable a church becomes the less vital and influential it is. Some of the saddest days in church history have been those when we were respectable and powerful and wealthy.

We American Christians, I think, have to learn something about vulnerability. Thank God we have not been forced to confront the issues which faced our German brothers and sisters a generation ago, and pray God we never will. Yet we need to learn again that God calls His church to a willingness to spend itself in obedience to His will, to risk its own life in carrying out His mission. We American Christians need to learn again that God is not interested in venerable institutions: what He wants is a community of people willing to be vulnerable for His sake.

We are learning that vulnerability is one of the keys to strong and creative human relationships. Something sad happens to many of us on our way through life. We extend our love, our time, our money, our loyalty - to a person, a child, a cause, a political party. We put ego, pride, self on the line. And sometimes we lose: the hurt is exquisite. Our pride is shattered. We learn the vulnerability of love and some of us resolve never to risk that kind of hurt again. And so our relationships are truncated, superficial, because we are guarding our own flanks, protecting ourselves, avoiding extending ourselves into any area where we might be vulnerable.

Life-giving relationships happen when people make themselves vulnerable; when people are willing to risk the inconvenience and the hurt that involvement with another means. It was no model of faithful marriage but there was much that was good about the movie "Same Time Next Year". The movie tells the sequential evolution of a relationship between a man and woman who meet one weekend per year - over several decades. Each several years they change in remarkable and familiar ways. In the mid nineteen-sixties he is an obviously successful business executive; pin stripes, vest, wing tip shoes, attache case - anti-acid tablets and sleeping pills. He has become venerable. She is wearing jeans, beads, head band, sandals, eating health food and flirting with the peace movement. He is a Hawk on Vietnam, belligerent angry - they talk for a while but something is obviously wrong. He's hiding something. And after heated words, it comes out. His own son has been killed in Vietnam. The acknowledgement makes him vulnerable, something he has been desperately trying to avoid, and he weeps, deeply, one has the impression - for the first time. It is a poignant scene - and the viewer knows that his vulnerability is necessary.

Dutch Catholic Henri Nouwen wrote a book with the fascinating title, "The Wounded Healer", in which he proposes that human relationships are only possible between people who are courageous enough to risk getting hurt; people, that is to say, who are vulnerable.

At the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the utterly amazing assertion that God himself is vulnerable: that He for whom the word venerability is perfectly suitable, chose vulnerability instead. He came into life in the vulnerable process of human birth. He exposed himself to life, human life with all its joys and dangers, laughter and tears. He made himself vulnerable to the venerable politicians and religious leaders of Jerusalem. And, He took on himself the universal human vulnerability to death.

He did all that, we dare to believe, because He loves us, and because there was no other way to show us how much He loves us. He did it, we believe, because He wanted to show us how to love one another: to show us that in order to love we would have to be vulnerable. We believe that there is salvation in that: that we may be healed, made whole - by a love that became vulnerable for us.

In Jesus Christ God calls us to a new vulnerability. The promise is a simple one: life is gained as it is given away: fullness is the reward when a person is willing to be empty: happiness is what you feel when you have given everything to make someone else happy: and venerability - the only venerability that matters is what you get when you learn, in the name of Jesus Christ to be vulnerable.

Amen.

Almighty God, forgive us for guarding our possessions, our pride, our dignity - even our church, so carefully. Teach us to be vulnerable. Give us the courage to be vulnerable, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.